Mining activity in the Peruvian Amazon is impoverishing the Arakbut Indigenous People

Polluting and destroying the territory is not the path to a fulfilling life. The Arakbut are turning to mining in the belief that it will make them rich but, in the meantime, wild animals are becoming scarce, fish are being polluted and forest food is becoming insufficient. Because of mining, Indigenous communities are becoming more dependent on the cash economy. The Arakbut people need to rebuild their autonomy, governance and self-determination in order to reverse this environmental damage.

By Jaime Corisepa Neri - 1st November 2021

Gold mining has been an occupation in Indigenous communities since the 1960s. The activity was originally carried out by hand using homemade trowels, shovels and wheelbarrows on the beaches and along the riverbanks. Now, backhoes and other machines such as dredgers, tracas and carancheras (suction machines) are used, thus increasing the impact on their territories. When the price of gold rose on the international market, the Peruvian government began to grant mining concessions in the territories of the Arakbut communities, located in the Amazonian department of Madre de Dios.

This violation of our rights has begun to mark the history of our territories through ethnocide, ecocide, mineral extraction and the intrusion of foreigners. Although the grassroots members and leaders of the Native Federation of Madre de Dios have tried to protect and stop the invasion of the settlers, the Peruvian State has ignored them and promoted one of the most disastrous and shameful policies in our history. They do not care about the existence of Indigenous Peoples, nor do they respect our rights under the Constitution and international law.
Those who hold the mining concessions now already consider it their right to exploit and contaminate our communal territories. Regional governments often endorse their activities and facilitate procedures by which to formalise them. And yet when we Arakbut demand our rights, the authorities do not act, do not monitor, and refuse to take any environmental or social responsibility. This is the sad reality.

This extractivist and criminalising policy means that the Indigenous territories are being polluted and deforested at a rapid pace. The authorities have not heard the voices of the Arakbut, and this colonisation has fatal physical, psychological and spiritual consequences. Many Arakbut have turned to mining in the belief that it will make them rich and wealthy millionaires but the effects on the environment and society are irreversible.

**Why is mining activity so devastating?**

Mining is an environmentally and socially irresponsible activity. Part of the territory is being eaten away like a disease, leaving behind it environmental liabilities and deforestation, affecting ecological niches, reducing biodiversity, and destroying giant trees such as the Brazil nut (*Bertholletia Excelsa*), the Brazilian teak (*Dipteryx Odorata*) and the silk floss tree (*Chorissia Sp*). Swamps, bamboo forests, lakes, streams and rivers are being turned into stony deserts in the process. This is affecting our Arakbut communities (Puerto Luz, Barranco Chico, San José de Karene, Arasaeri, Boca Inambari and Kotsimba) and the southeast of the [buffer zone of the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve](#).

As far as the mining corporations and the multilateral lending banks are concerned, these projects have little impact. Either they don't see what is happening or they don't want to see it. And yet the native peoples who live in the territory and depend on its natural resources know that it is vital to protect and conserve these areas for their use. Our Arakbut territories are no longer in a healthy or stable condition. Quite the opposite, their natural resources have been greatly reduced: there are no more animals to *mitayar* (hunt), fish are scarce (and those that are available are polluted), habitat reproduction has
declined rapidly, and food from the forest is insufficient and in locations increasingly distant from the community.

Naturally, this affects people’s daily diet. Our natural foods are being replaced by processed foods from outside the area. Community members are becoming dependent on external foodstuffs, and this has an economic cost. The communities are trying to offer an alternative that is more economically attuned to our cosmovision but these initiatives are being hindered by a lack of support from the relevant authorities. In other words, if you want to eat, you need to have the money to buy these products so there is no option but to continue working in order to earn a cash income. Meanwhile, the mining activity is continuing to destroy the forests, and no one says a word.

**Changing lives due to mining activity**

In the past, when they had their own autonomous government, the Arakbut did not need to rely on money: their use of nature was integral and balanced, in line with the climate and seasons. The natural resources were our allies, whereas today they are seen merely as commodities. Improvements in the way nature is managed and our knowledge of it have also been fundamental. The Arakbut elders, the *wabayorokeris*, used to have influence over the decisions of each clan and formed their connection to the spirits of the forest, animals, rivers and sacred sites. Spiritual alliances and respect for living beings were an integral part of this different lifestyle.

Today, because of the intrusion of globalisation into the communities, driven by State policies, many Indigenous people have become slaves to money. It is not only the territory that is being destroyed but their ancestral way of life too. Community members no longer plan their daily activities, for example fishing or *mitayar*, but are instead becoming miners or going to the towns to buy fuel and other products. On top of this, most of them have stopped interacting with nature and their traditional activities, preferring instead to negotiate with traders, workshop owners and gold dealers. They sit in their villages getting
drunk, leaving their families alone in their houses, and they have no time to care for or protect their children.

The Arakbut now sometimes no longer teach their traditions to the new generations. Their social circle has changed: the connection between fellow villagers has been broken. They no longer talk to each other and are beginning to value outsiders. They do not participate in the community's organic meetings due to lack of time, there are constant conflicts between families and sexually-transmitted infections are now occurring in the communities. If you do not work in gold mining, you starve because of the need for a cash income. Unfortunately, the mining activity has resulted in a total dependence on consumerism.

Spiritual issues also need to be considered. The connection with sacred sites of cultural significance, the relationship to healing chants and spiritual alliances no longer exists. There is no longer the same respect for or dialogue with the forest spirits. The sacred sites are waiting for the Arakbut to connect. If this disconnection persists, if we give up our strength, we will continue to lose interest in protecting and conserving our territory.

**From the destruction of our territories to a re-evaluation of our identity**

But all is not lost because, if the Arakbut people organise, they will be able to bring about in-depth change. Self-governance must be strengthened and our agenda prioritised. We need to remember where we come from and how we used to live ancestrally. We need to compare how Arakbut self-government was before and how it is now that we form part of the global system. In this context, we have to ask ourselves precisely what development is: is it the extraction of gold and the destruction of our territory, losing our language and our identity, forgetting the knowledge that has been passed down from generation to generation? If we take off this blindfold, the light of hope will flood in and, with the support of the leaders, the elders, and also the family, we will be able to make changes. Education starts at home, since parents are the best teachers children can have.
We need to promote alternative economic solutions that are more attuned to our culture: Indigenous tourism, use of medicinal plants, promotion of our art, adding value to essences and wild fruits such as chestnut, cocoa, chimucua, huayo blanco and charichuelo. The Arakbut nation needs to develop a legal strategy and bring an international lawsuit for violation of our human rights and contamination of our resources. In addition, environmental compensation must be demanded from the State and the companies for the damage caused by the mining rights that have been granted in the communal territories.

The socio-environmental impact of mining activity on the Arakbut territories must be acknowledged as the main problem. This discussion has to take place with the involvement of the leaders and elders, with the objective of recognising that mining activity is slowly but surely killing us, even more than the pandemic. Once this has been recognised, a way of internally regulating mining must be found. Surveillance and control actions must be strengthened from our own Indigenous vision. We must conserve and protect what is ours, and promote a territorial monitoring programme: the Arakbut Indigenous Guard. This force must have the authority and power to exercise order and limit encroachments onto the territory.

If we want change, we must promote comprehensive training schools for young Arakbut to gain a knowledge of the forest and of our identity: we have to educate the new generations on the value of their territory. Young people must care for the territory because it is important to continue living in harmony with the nature that surrounds us. The community leaders and opos of the Arakbut nation must be aware of the importance of their leadership: they must go to the sacred sites to gain spiritual strength and, through this, obtain visions of struggle and resistance that will help protect our territories.
Some considerations

The Peruvian State will always promote globalisation, support large corporations and favour multilateral banks. If the State is aligned with the new world order then why should we continue to rely on it? We have wasted a great deal of time asking for recognition of our rights even though this is something they will never agree to because they are practising a modern form of colonisation. We expect nothing from the Peruvian State. Trusting and placing our future in their hands has led us to the verge of extinction. This is why we need to act now. We need to strengthen the Arakbut nation as it undergoes a reorganisational process, and exercise the freedom we have always had.

How can anyone believe that mining is a form of development? Our canoe is about to sink and our wanamei tree, our tree of life, is about to come tumbling down. Mining creates divisions and family arguments. We are killing nature, the nature with which we have lived in harmony and which has given us the knowledge we pass down from generation to generation. Destroying our homes, our houses, our markets and our pharmacopoeia is not a path to development. It is time to rebuild our Arakbut territorial governance.

International experts are aware of the importance of recognising Indigenous Peoples and their territories. In practice, however, companies and governments turn a blind eye to this fact, seeking only to exploit the resources that will satisfy the needs of the global system. Multilateral banks also have a responsibility: in addition to financing the extractive industry in our Amazon, their reserves of gold bullion came from ore that was originally extracted from our ancestral territories.

We need the international organisations that are fighting climate change and protecting the Amazon to directly support Indigenous organisations and their communities. We must abandon all demagoguery and ally with individuals who respect the rules of the game set by nature. Finally, the communities must reflect on the depletion of our resources. We are being unfair to future generations. That is why it is important for the Arakbut to start to
seek their roots, find out where they come from and think about what the future holds for our young people.

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